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ABSTRACT

This keynote address speaks to problems faced by the elderly, particularly in the areas of finances and social services. The public concerns over the viability of the social security system are briefly examined and confronted. The speaker, U.S. Commissioner on Aging, stresses the need for his peers to become acquainted with, and use, the many services available to them, including special cost-saving public transportation and no-cost or low-cost legal services. He further advocates the need for older persons to remain involved in life, as a source of strength not only for themselves but for the nation. (CKJ)

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Our Common Concerns in the Field of Aging

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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KEYNOTE ADDRESS BY DR. ARTHUR S. FLEMMING

Mr. Spector, distinguished members of the Ohio Commission on Aging, Dave Crowley, and participants in this Conference. As a number of you know, it is always a very meaningful experience for me to have the opportunity of coming back to the state of Ohio. I came to Ohio for the first time 52 years ago this fall when I enrolled as a member of the freshman class at Ohio Wesleyan University. The four years that I had as an undergraduate at Ohio Wesleyan meant a great deal to me then and have continued to mean a great deal to me down through the years. It was a high privilege to have the opportunity of returning to my alma mater as president and working with the trustees, the faculty, the students, and the alumni of that university. During those years I also had the opportunity of becoming acquainted with many parts of Ohio, because the alumni of Ohio Wesleyan University are pretty well scattered throughout the state.

This is the third time I have had the privilege of returning and participating in the Governor's Conference on Aging, and I am very grateful to Mr. Spector and Mr. Crowley and the others who planned this program for inviting me back. I have known Sid Spector for a considerable time because, as you know, he had a very active career in the Federal Government, both on the legislative and executive sides. As a result of his work in the Federal Government, many of us, over a considerable length of time, have thought of him as one of our truly fine leaders in the field of aging. I am delighted he is serving as chairman of your Commission, and I am always happy to have the opportunity of being associated with him.

I have known your executive director since he assumed the duties and responsibilities of his important office. I admire and respect the leadership that he has brought to the field of aging in the state of Ohio. I feel deeply indebted to him for the leadership that he has brought to the field of aging on the national basis as he has participated with his fellow state executive directors on aging in working with us at the federal level, in counseling us, in needling us, in keeping our feet to the fire. You have a good set-up in terms of persons who are capable of helping you translate rhetoric into action.

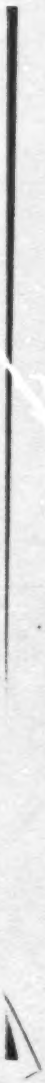
I have been very much interested in listening to the comments of Mr. Spector as he discussed issues which you identified a year ago, and as he

pointed out, the issues that you are going to consider over the next two days. I note that he is not satisfied with the progress that has been made. I think that is a healthy state of mind for those of us in the field of aging. We have no reason whatever for being satisfied. There is no question in my mind at all but that in the areas he has identified, and in many other areas, there is a great deal that remains to be done. I think that the concept of this Conference is a sound one in terms of generating the power that can lead to action.

I do want to underline what Mr. Spector has underlined, namely, the role you can play in helping to bring about the evolution of sound policies in the field of aging but, above everything else, in helping to see to it that at the area and the community levels these policies are implemented in such a manner as to be of help to today's older person.

Now, as I have the opportunity of working in the field of aging, not only in Washington but in traveling throughout the country, and working with those in the private sector as well as those in the public sector, at the state level and at the community level, I have noted some matters that are of deep concern to all who are involved in the field of aging. It is these concerns that I would like to share with you in my opening comments.

I look forward to the opportunity of trying to respond to your questions and comments. Normally, when I accept an invitation to speak anywhere in the country, I accept with the understanding that I will have the opportunity to respond to questions and comments, because this is the way in which I can obtain ideas which I in turn can share, not only with my colleagues, not only in Washington, but with persons in the field of aging throughout the nation.



DR. ARTHUR S. FLEMMING *is widely regarded as the single most important figure in the field of aging in the nation. He is U.S. Commissioner on Aging and heads the Administration on Aging of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.*

During his career, Dr. Flemming has been President of Ohio Wesleyan University, and was Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare in the administration of President Eisenhower. He was in charge of the 1971 White House Conference on Aging.

Today he continues to serve as Special Assistant on Aging to the President of the United States. He recently was appointed Chairman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights.

Income

As we think in terms of the concerns that all of us in the field of aging share, we at least think in terms of our concerns in the area of income. All of us here this morning know that if we could raise the levels of income for older persons more and more, older persons will have the opportunity of making their own decisions regarding their own lives. Most of us in this audience recognize that 18 to 20 percent of persons 65 years of age and over have annual incomes below the poverty threshold. We are concerned about that. We feel that is an indefensible situation.

As we think of the area of income, many of us are concerned about some of the inequities that still remain within the Social Security system, inequities which, in

many instances, have an adverse impact on women. Also as we think of income, we rejoice in the fact that our Government now has a maintenance of income program for the aged, blind, and disabled, namely the Supplementary Social Security Income Program. Most of us recognize that other changes need to be made in the law and in regulations in order to make that program operate more effectively.

Social Security

Now, many of us are deeply concerned about the attacks that have been made in the press, in magazine articles, on TV, and in speeches about the soundness of the Social Security system. I know, as a result of my contacts throughout the nation, that these attacks have aroused fears in the lives of many older persons. I just want to say this: that anyone who alleges that the Social Security system faces bankruptcy is talking in an irresponsible manner!

Five of us who have had the privilege of serving as Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare became so concerned about these attacks that we got together and developed a white paper designed to deal with the issues that confront us in the Social Security area in a positive and constructive manner. The five secretaries were John Gardner, Wilbur Cohen, Robert Finch, and Elliot Richardson, and myself. Also associated in that statement were the three living former Commissioners of Social Security: Dr. Charles Schottland, now of Brandeis University; William Mitchell, who served as commissioner when I was secretary; and Robert Ball, who served in a very distinguished manner as commissioner up until about two years ago.

In this statement we say categorically that the concept underlying the Social Security system is a sound one. We recognize that the system does confront some fiscal problems, but we point out that the Congress can, and we believe the Congress will, resolve those problems in a sound manner. The Congress of the United States has had a history since 1935 of dealing with the fiscal issues connected with the Social Security system in a responsible manner, and I see no indication of any tendency on the part of the Congress of acting any other way in the present and in the future.

Let me sum it up. If you are worried about whether or not you are going to continue to receive your Social Security check, at least at its present level, you can cross that off your list of worries. There is no doubt in my mind but that you will continue to receive it.

Services for the Elderly

Now let me deal briefly with the area of services for older persons. Those of us in the field of aging are concerned about strengthening the new aging network that has come into being over the last 18 months. Most of you here know what I am talking about: the state commission or agencies on aging; I am talking about area agencies on aging; I am talking about nutrition projects for older persons; I am talking about advisory committees to the state agencies on aging; the advisory committees to the area agencies on aging; the advisory committees to the nutritional projects. This is a tremendous network that has come into being within a very short period of time.

As we seek to sum up our hopes and aspirations for that network, we say time and time again we want the various units within the network to become the focal points for aging within their respective jurisdictions. But above everything else, we want them to become advocates for older persons in connection with all agencies that confront the lives of older persons. Personally, I am enthusiastic about the kind of response that those participating in this network are obtaining as a result of their leadership.

The network is provided for in the Older Americans Act of 1965, as amended on May 3, 1973. The Older Americans Act, under existing law, expires on June 30th of this year. Last week, the House of Representatives of the Congress of the United States passed a bill extending the life of the Older Americans Act for another four years. The vote on that extension was 377 to 19. In my judgment that's a tribute, first of all to senior power, and in the second place, to the kind of leadership that is being provided throughout our nation in the field of aging.

Tomorrow morning I appear before the Senate Committee that will be considering the extension of the Older Americans Act. As far as I can determine, the Senate will respond to the challenge and opportunity presented to them to extend this act and to strengthen it in exactly the same way as did the House of Representatives.

As we think in terms of the operation of this network, particularly as it relates to the service areas, all of us are concerned about doing everything we can to bring about coordination of the delivery of existing services in every one of the communities represented here this morning. That makes sense to take what we have, to pool it, and to deliver it in such a way that our resources are of maximum help for the maximum number of older persons. But also, those of us working in the field of aging are very much concerned about obtaining for older persons a fair share of the resources made available under other programs.

Revenue Sharing

Mr. Spector has talked about general revenue sharing. That's an issue that confronts the field of aging throughout the nation. We are not getting our fair share. Remember that act specifies eight priority areas where local governments can spend funds. One of those eight is services for the poor or aged. It seems to me that it is up to us to do everything we can to organize our forces at the local levels and to put the pressure on county commissioners, city councilmen, and other county and city officials until we do get our fair share of general revenue sharing.

I think we have the potential power to get results, but we've got to organize in order to achieve it. I am interested in that you are endeavoring to pool resources of private organizations so that you can more effectively bring pressure to bear.

Many of you know that one source of support for services for older persons has been the adult service titles of the Social Security Act. It is estimated that in 1974 about $400 million was spent for services for the aged, blind, and disabled; and of that amount, about $200 million for older persons. The law has been changed. A new law becomes operative on October 1, called Title XX. Under that law, $2½ billion will be allocated to the states. Also under that law, each state must develop a plan for the use of those funds, and that plan must be made public.

I certainly hope older persons in this state, and every other state, will watch the development of their state plan, and if older persons are not given their fair share, that you make yourselves heard and will insist on older persons obtaining their fair share. At the federal level, we're now working within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to get issued the best regulations that we can. I can assure you that we're going to stay on top of this, and we look forward to working with the entire aging network, in order to get results.

Information and Referral Services

But also as we think in terms of services, all of us are concerned about the millions of older persons who are unaware of the resources and services available for them. You know what I am talking about. This is why we are giving the highest priority to having available, hopefully by June 30 of this year, information and referral services throughout the nation that will be reasonably available and accessible to all older persons.

At the beginning, these services will in many instances just meet minimum standards, but I know you have services here in the state of Ohio that go far beyond meeting minimum standards. Become acquainted with the information and referral services in your area. Do everything that you can to strengthen them, and support them. Do everything that you can to be a part of an outreach program that will tell older persons about these information and referral services so that these can in turn build bridges between the older person who is lost, who is isolated, and the services and resources available to him.

We need additional resources and services, but how tragic it is when we have a situation where millions of older persons are unaware of what we have, and are not using them.

Nutrition

Now, all of us in the field of aging also are deeply concerned about the older persons who do not have access to well-balanced, nutritious meals. Mr. Spector is correct in saying that one of the most exciting and significant developments in the field of aging was a decision on the part of the Congress to launch a nutrition program for older persons. As of today, 665 nutrition projects in all of our states are serving 228,000 meals five days a week at 4,200 sites.

This network has come into being in just a little over a year. It's an exciting development, but it must be regarded just as a beginning. There are about 700,000 older persons participating in these programs on a week-to-week basis. Obviously not all of them are on a five-day basis; some of them are on two days, three days, and so on. But there are waiting lists throughout our nation for participation in these programs and the number waiting is more than double the number of persons actually participating in the program.

We are delighted that the concern has been expressed in a tangible way. But we are not complacent. We are not satisfied.

Transportation

We are also concerned about the older persons who need transportation — and I am delighted that a year ago and again this year you are focusing on this issue. After all, it doesn't do much good to provide services for older persons if they have no way of getting to those services and benefiting from them.

I have just finished four public hearings throughout the nation on this subject. I had a public hearing in Philadelphia; another one in Sanford, N.C., in order to get into the rural area; one in Kansas City; and one in San Francisco. During the course of those hearings I had the opportunity of listening to 120 witnesses, many of them consumers, many of them trying to work out constructive solutions to this problem.

I am delighted that you are focusing on the question of reducing, if not eliminating, the cost for utilization of public transportation in this state. As your Commission knows, Congress, in passing the last transportation act, helped put some pressure on by requiring that the authorities who obtain their funds must in the future agree to cut the cost for older persons at least in half.

But as I listened to witnesses throughout this country, I became aware of this fact — that we have within our communities programs financed by the Federal Government that are organized to use their funds to develop oftentimes special transportation services for older persons. But when the local people try to get together and pool all of those resources, they immediately run up against roadblocks which grow out of the different kinds of regulations issued by the Federal Government.

I'm convinced that one of the best things we could do to help today's older persons in the transportation area is to persuade the Congress that whenever the agencies responsible for these programs get together in a particular community and agree on a sound transportation program for older persons that Congress should permit them to cut away the underbrush and to waive all the requirements that stand in the way of that kind of pooling of resources.

Now, that's kind of a technical approach to the field of transportation, but I received testimony from an area director from Lincoln, Neb. who made up his mind that in spite of the obstacles somehow or other he was going to bring about a pooling of those resources in order to have a special transportation program for older persons. He's succeeded and he's getting good results.

One of the things that I'm going to say to the Senate committee tomorrow is that I hope that when they report on their version of the Older Americans Act they will include a provision which will make it possible in a practical way to pool the transportation resources now available for those under public assistance, for those who qualify for rehabilitation, for those participating in the nutrition program, for those in other Title III programs so that in one community after another we can have one special service designed to deal with the unique and special needs of older persons.

I'm so impressed with the fact that in our urban areas, but particulary in our rural areas, we do need to develop these special services. In Philadelphia, older persons can ride on public transportation without any charge — yet

one older person after another came before me as a witness and said, "This is fine but how do I get to that transportation system — I live blocks away and I operate under a particular handicap." Others went on to say, "It's great but when I reach the end of the line, how do I get to where I need to go in order to obtain the service that I am anxious to receive?" So in addition to opening up our public transportation systems where they exist — and in many parts of this nation they don't exist — we have to focus on a pooling of our resources so that we can develop truly effective special services for older persons.

Legal Services

Now, in addition, we are concerned about the older persons who need access to legal service. I'm not going to go into that in detail except to say that over the country there are now 60 area agencies on aging that are investing federal funds in legal services for the older person. The Congress has directed us to use a million dollars for this particular purpose during the present fiscal year and we intend to do that in the most constructive possible manner.

Also, those of us in the field of aging are concerned about making available homemaker and home health aide services to older persons in their own homes or other places of residence. Likewise, we are concerned about utilizing funds in such a way as to make repair services available. In addition, we are very much concerned about obtaining a fair share of the resources being made available under the Community Development Act. These are just some of the service areas where we have concerns. They are areas where there is some momentum under way throughout our nation, but we have *got* to do a great deal to accelerate that momentum.

Continued Involvement

There is just one other area which I want to introduce. That is the area of opening up opportunities for continued involvement on the part of older persons. We as older persons do not want to be put on the shelf. We want to continue to be involved in a significant and constructive manner in the life of our day. Again, we're making some progress but how much more we *need* to do in this area! I hope you'll ask me a question or two that will give me a chance to amplify that point.

I'm going to end my opening comments by sharing with you once again what to me is the most significant story that came out of the White House Conference on Aging of 1971. It's the story of George Black, a member of the black community, and resident of Winston Salem, N.C. When he was 90 years of age the Government became aware that he was an expert in making bricks by hand. It invited him to go to Guiana in Latin America in order to teach others how to make brick by hand. When he returned, he said:

"I have always prayed to the Lord that my last days would be my best days. The Lord has answered my prayer."

The Lord has answered his prayer by giving him the opportunity of continuing to serve his fellow human beings.

Older persons throughout the nation are offering that prayer every day of their lives, and you know and I know that that prayer will be answered only as we give God the opportunity of working in and through our lives. Give God that opportunity not by trusting in our own strength or will power but by trusting only in the strength that He alone can give.

That is why I believe that all of us throughout the nation who are concerned about all these issues should put at the top of our list of priorities the strengthening of the spiritual foundation of our nation.